

## **¡Culturas en el aire!**

### **A Cross-Cultural Communications Initiative**

It does not make sense to speak of linguistic and cultural diversity in contemporary societies, if there is no media functioning in two or more languages. Bilingual radio stations and programs enrich the cultural environment in the sense that they not only make linguistic differences “audible,” but also enable local communities to build and develop their own symbolic and material spaces in increasingly complex media systems.

## **¡Culturas en el aire!**

On October 14th and 15th, 2005, a group of scholars and radio producers and broadcasters gathered in Santiago, Chile to learn and speak about radio experiences led by individuals and organizations linked to indigenous peoples (*pueblos originarios*) from the Americas. **¡Culturas en el aire!** was an academic, cultural, and communicational meeting in which scholars joined an open conversation with indigenous communicators to learn about their creative knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

Our meeting was held at the Centro Cultural Estación Mapocho in Santiago, Chile. This first meeting was conceived and organized in collaboration with **The Cultural Agents Initiative** (<http://culturalagents.org/>) and the Mapuche radio program **Wixage Anai**. The David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies (<http://drclas.fas.harvard.edu/index.pl/santiago>) at Harvard played a major role in making this initiative a reality, as well as the Centro Cultural Estación Mapocho (<http://www.estacionmapocho.cl/presenta.html>). In addition, Fundación AVINA, and the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics (<http://hemi.nyu.edu/>) were partners in the process of carrying out this dream. Our meeting was also sponsored by Observatorio de Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas, Instituto de Estudios Avanzados at the Universidad de Santiago de Chile, Ser Indígena (<http://www.serindigena.cl/>), Radio

Tierra, Farmacia Mapuche Makewelawen, LOM Ediciones, and the Art Forum-DRCLAS at Harvard University.

We were able to bring together a stellar group of radio producers, scholars, artists, and intellectuals. We were honored to have radio communicators and cultural activists from the Mapuche communities in Chile and Argentina, the Kawésqar community in the Patagonia, the Henlet Pueblo in Paraguay, the Guarayo Pueblo in Bolivia, the Aymará Pueblo in Chile, Quechua in Peru, Lipan, Apache, Yaqui and Cherokee, Warm Springs, Wasco, and Aleut tribes from the United States. In addition, a distinguished group of scholars from Chile, Argentina, Colombia, the United States and Canada were active participants (mostly as discussants) in the course of the two-day seminar.

In eight distinct panels, radio experiences were presented as points of departure for a discussion on the creative views of radio as a medium to practice community media strategies, cross-cultural communications, and cultural, political, and social agency. Our seminar ended with a plenary session aimed to outline a basic agenda to continue working together on ways to strengthen and expand the existing spaces, networks and knowledge about languages and cultures in mainstream and non-mainstream media in the Americas. One of the concluding agreements was **to establish a summer school for the training of young indigenous and intercultural radio communicators**; a space to promote the dissemination of the accumulated knowledge and practices of cross cultural communication.

## **Indigenous Peoples and Radio**

The vast number of indigenous and intercultural radio initiatives that exist in the Americas are the voices of multiple communities, therefore contributing to a more culturally diverse society. Most of these initiatives incorporate their native languages and cultural code in order to constitute a space for their cultural, political and social empowerment. In this way, they build a sense of identity and autonomy on behalf of the local communities, as well as to the struggles for their territorial, political, and cultural rights.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when new technology and media systems are the very base on which societies function, indigenous radio producers have shown us the key role of languages and cultures in the fields of communications. For those who work in academia, and particularly, in the humanities and social sciences, the engagement with these theoretical and practical lessons in intercultural media production is a path to complicate, widen, renew, and question the scope of our knowledge.

It is necessary to highlight that indigenous peoples and organizations struggle against precarious economic and material conditions to produce their radio programs. In many cases, the financing of these radio projects rests on community support and local donations, along with the sporadic support of state entities or international agencies. What is remarkable in this process is the ability of these radio initiatives to continue working irrespective of external support, basing their presence in the “air” on their own sense of economic, social, and cultural agency. Thanks to the flexibility of radio to function as a medium in very diverse settings, indigenous and intercultural communicators have developed unique and creative strategies to overcome institutional, economic, and geographical constraints.

Language and languages are central to the technological and communicational deployment of indigenous radio communication. A fascinating dimension of this process is the way in which the orality of a modern technology (radio) is mixed and fused with the voices and echoes of ancestral oral traditions.<sup>3</sup> Indigenous radio programs and/or stations develop creative esthetic, and communicational processes that mix different oralities, languages and symbolic codes. In this context, indigenous airwaves give us the opportunity to learn about the high degree of creativity involved in communicating and performing linguistic and cultural differences through sounds and voices. More than a written medium, indigenous radio voices can fluidly become part of the media ecology of indigenous communities in urban, semi-urban and rural areas. There is an inner engagement between the indigenous radio program and the indigenous audience: the commonality of oral communications. Finally, it is worth mentioning that many indigenous radio programs are also transmitted through Internet, amplifying the scope of their airwaves on a national and transnational, local and global scale. In spite of their

precariousness in infrastructure and financial resources, indigenous radio broadcasters and producers manage to achieve a more complex stage of *intermediality*.

From this perspective, our goal is to collect information as well as share critical reflections relating to the diverse radio expressions developed by *pueblos originarios* and other bilingual communities across the continent. In this same context, we would like to include other forms of media in which the relationship between technology, languages, and intercultural practices are explored, such as, writing (*literaturas indígenas*), audiovisual production, and the visual arts in general. Lastly, this space attempts to encourage and include not only academic research projects, but also juridical, social, and politico-cultural initiatives that contribute to enhance the past, present, and future of the indigenous peoples in the Americas

Our October 2005 meeting was the point of departure for an extensive collaboration between academics, artists, intellectuals, and indigenous and intercultural radio broadcasters and producers. ¡*Culturas en el aire!* aims to bridge the academic world and civil society within a vision that is at the same time both local and global in scope. This project is, in this sense, a cross-cultural initiative that seeks to support the airwaves of the *pueblos originarios* of the Americas and, at the same time, highlight their local sense of autonomy and agency, within a broader push to build a more pluralistic and global field for cultural communications.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the seminar, *Feria Pewün*, a multicultural fair, featured booths by various indigenous and community organizations, including Internet, radio, newspapers, culinary art, jewelry, and crafts. The goal of the fair was to show multiple practices of cultural patrimony, creativity, diversity, intercultural media and community building led by or linked to the *pueblos originarios* in their respective regions. Furthermore, the event included a play by a Huilliche theater group and a literary reading by Mapuche poets.

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<sup>2</sup> Many studies have analyzed the relationship between community radio stations and the struggle for cultural citizenship. See, *Ciudadanos mediáticos: La construcción de lo público en la radio* by Rosalía Winocur (Barcelona: Editorial Gedisa, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth exploration of orality and technology, see *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*, by Walter Ong (London: Methuen & Co., 1982).